



ABERDEEN CIVIC SOCIETY

Registered Charity Number SC003089

Newsletter No. 81: March 2013

Coming Events

Wednesday 27th March 2013: A Tourist's View of the City and Shire. An illustrated talk by Mr Stewart Spence, Hotelier and Businessman. At the Royal Northern & University Club, No. 9 Albyn Place, at 7.30 for 8 pm.

Wednesday 24th April 2013: our Annual General Meeting, followed by a presentation of topical interest. At the Royal Northern & University Club, No. 9 Albyn Place, at 7.30 pm prompt.

Planning Matters

Oldmill Lane / Bon Accord Crescent: proposal for erection of a mixed-use building consisting of serviced residential apartments and a business unit. This is the vacant site on the sloping ground at the end of the Crescent between Oldmill Lane and Springbank Terrace. It has never to our knowledge been developed in the past. The current proposal is to erect a six-storey block on the site - three storeys above the level of the Crescent. The placing of a glass-finished block with multiple use on this site would be contrary to good planning. The site adjoins one of the most striking terraces in Aberdeen and would be seen from several points of view. In addition, the site is poorly serviced for vehicular access, and any access would be hazardous at this corner. Our submission: "The proposed development would be detrimental to the amenity of the adjacent Bon Accord Crescent and of the Conservation Area in which it is sited. Vehicular access to the site is limited and the stopping of vehicles and any pedestrian access would be prejudicial to public safety".

Editor's News And Comment

Jan 22nd. Looked out the window this morning and thought 'Snaa's all gone', then switched on the radio to find that the roads are very hazardous 15-plus miles in all directions out of Aberdeen but especially in the rural hinterland. One begins to wonder whether it is actually a feasible proposition to live in these inland places. Winter conditions are obviously much more extreme and also persist much longer - set in earlier and end later - than on the coast. Everything is so much more time and trouble, takes so much longer - basic survival becomes the overarching preoccupation, crowding out other interests and concerns. Even the summers in these inland locations are oppressive - just too hot, no cooling sea breezes, no access to the coast, dead, still air. This, of course, is why humanity has always tended to cluster around seaports, river estuaries and coastal locations, quite apart from the business and employment opportunities associated with ports, the rivers and the sea - trade, commerce, import/export, fishing, boat & ship-building and transportation.

Feb 10th. A Sunday afternoon spent in Union Terrace Gardens, assembling birds' nesting boxes (from kits) with a view to building up the resident wildlife. Cold, rain & sleet, but we were in a sheltered spot under the arches which support Union Terrace itself. Back to the Gardens the following Friday to see the 15 birds' nesting boxes, now varnished, being located high up on the trees by skilled personnel with a cherry-picker. A much milder, Spring-like day, bright & sunny and clumps of snowdrops in evidence. This is the kind of small-scale incremental improvement, largely undertaken by volunteers, which can transform our civic amenities at modest expense.

Feb 17th. To Holburn Junction and west end of Union Street. Bell's Hotel is in a very run-down state, the bar still open for business but otherwise closed up, the frontage ill-maintained with much vegetation and a large tree growing out of upper storeys. Plans for redevelopment, extending the building back to Justice Mill Lane, seem to have stalled, as with the adjacent Capitol building. Further along, in the old Watt & Grants building, one of a clutch of gents' outfitters, G*Raw, is having a closing-down sale, advertising 70% off. ACC has reluctantly granted planning permission for change of use to a bar/restaurant. The long-established Austin Reed premises are in poor condition and are advertised for rent, but it is difficult to find tenants for premises westward of the Music Hall - too far from the main centres of retail activity in St Nicholas Street, Union Bridge and the Union Square mega-mall.

Along Bon Accord Street and Langstane Place to Justice Mill Lane: the Radisson Park Inn hotel looks as tacky and out-of-place as ever, its finishes deteriorating already. Similarly the Travelodge at the other end of the IQ office building. Across JML, the former Budz Bar premises, closed for refurbishment in 2007 and never reopened, are a major eyesore.

We have become so indoctrinated into regarding property as a wonderful can't-fail asset and investment that it is difficult to accept that property can, in fact, be effectively worthless or even a net liability, costing more to service and maintain than it can ever earn in rent or other income. The familiar pattern in the city centre has usually been that ground-floor premises can be let out for use as shops, bars, restaurants and fast-food outlets, but that upper floors are left unlet and unused. Upstairs premises used to accommodate professionals like dentists, tailors, solicitors, architects and accountants, but less so nowadays, perhaps because of the lack of modern facilities, car parking or uncongenial surroundings. The question would obviously arise as to whether it is possible to operate such business activity in a street or locality largely given over to pubs and bars. Much the same would apply to the residential accommodation which used to prevail on the uppermost floors of these old buildings, where the means of exit in the event of fire might be a concern.

The private-sector solution to buildings which are expensive to maintain but which can be neither sold nor let out would be to demolish. 'Listing' and Conservation Area status operates to prevent such action, but it is difficult if not impossible to force landlords to maintain unwanted buildings to an acceptable standard - many proprietors simply cannot afford to do so, in the absence of any income stream. Some may resort to deliberate fire-raising to remove a building regarded as a financial liability and money-pit. Derelict and empty buildings are quite likely to be set on fire anyway, by vandals, tramps and rough sleepers.

This is pretty much the position we had reached in relation to Marischal College some years ago. The building was impossibly expensive for its owners - the University of Aberdeen - to maintain to any acceptable standard, given that they had little use for it. There was no serious prospect of sale or of finding a suitable tenant. The private-sector response would have been to demolish, but such was unacceptable to public opinion. In the meantime, like much of Union Street and the city centre, Marischal College was deteriorating and quite likely to go on fire and burn down. The only available solution was to take the building, in effect, into public ownership on the basis of a 175-year lease to Aberdeen City Council, since when it has been renovated and put to productive use.

This seems to me to be the only workable solution to other such instances of 'market failure', where no private-sector solution is forthcoming or acceptable, such as the former Watt & Grants and E&Ms buildings on Union Street and the Victoria Buildings at the foot of Bridge Street. The Council should be able to buy the buildings at modest expense - the landlords want out - and purchase and renovation costs might form the basis of a future TIF application, given the improving effect on the whole surrounding area, which we have already seen happen to spectacular effect with Marischal College and Broad Street.

March 7th: Robert Gordon University produced a 'ten point plan' to enhance the city centre, which included the following proposals:

Reviewing the zoning of Union Street to include the prospect of returning parts of it to residential use and give prominence to pedestrian use, cyclists and public transport.

Restoring city squares such as Golden Square, Bon Accord Square and the Castlegate as vital public spaces for markets and cultural events.

Enhancing connectivity (pedestrian) along the north-south retail axis (George Street to Union Square).

Creating links between Union Street and the harbour and facilitating the development of new public, cultural and commercial activities that relate to the harbour.

Redeveloping areas that offer little public amenity because of poor design (e.g. the Aberdeen Market building on the Green and the Trinity Centre car park) with high-quality contemporary architecture and urban landscaping that contributes to the cityscape, improves connectivity and conveys civic ambition and pride.

The Energy Capital - create a new public facility of world-class design calibre that celebrates local energy industries and their technological innovation, reinforces the international reputation and identity of the city and serves as a powerful 'magnet' for Aberdeen.

The AWPR - utilise the opportunity the bypass presents to enhance the urban realm through road space reallocation to give pedestrians, cyclists, public transport and cars equal status within the city centre. And control development along the AWPR to avoid blighting the city centre.

Contributed by Alex Mitchell.